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Debate Is Focused on Responsibility of News Media

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WASHINGTON, May 30 — Senior Reagan aides are attempting to focus the debate over the news media's role in reporting national secrets on the media's responsibilities, Administration officials said today.

The Administration officials outlined an approach similar to that taken Thursday by William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, and Lieut Gen. William E. Odom, the director of the National Security Agency, who played down their recent warnings to journalists and asked the media for more cooperation.

The Administration officials said their hope was that such a softer approach would garner more public and Congressional support than one that might mire the issue in concerns about freedom of the press.

In a reflection of this softer approach, the officials said they had eliminated a phrase threatening the news media with prosecution from a statement issued Wednesday by Mr. Casey and General Odom. That statement warned journalists about publishing sensitive secrets in connection with the espionage trial of Ronald W. Pelton.

The statement had been prepared for review by Donald T. Regan, the White House chief of state, and Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, President Reagan's national security adviser.

White House Backs Off

Today the White House went a step further, backing away from one of the most controversial points in that statement.

It said, "Those reporting on the trial should be cautioned against speculation and reporting details beyond the information actually released at trial."

Edward P. Djerejian, a White House spokesman, said today that the use of the word "speculation" had been a mistake. He said, however, that journalist should be cautious in reporting on classified information that "goes beyond what has been introduced in the trial."

"'Speculation' is a very loose term, and in no way do we mean to imply by the use of 'speculation,' prior press censorship or press censorship, or in any way impinging on the freedoms of the press to report information and events," Mr. Djerejian said.

"So 'speculation,' perhaps and I do agree, I think a better word than speculation could have been found," he said.

Other Reagan aides said that Mr. Djerejian's remarks signaled the tack the White House hopes to take in the dispute over unauthorized disclosure.

In a Thursday interview with The Associated Press, Mr. Casey and Mr. Odom themselves backed away from their statement. Mr. Casey said that the press was being "hysterical" by suggesting that the remarks amounted to asking the media to tear up the First Amendment and scuttle the freedom of the press.

Mr. Djerejian had said Thursday that the White House was in "full agreement with the thrust of the statement." He said today that the response had been "carefully" chosen to draw a distinction between the White House's view and the statement.

While Mr. Casey and other senior officials in the intelligence area have had the lead up to now in advancing the Administration's concerns about unauthorized disclosures, the aides said that the White House's involvement could intensify next week.

Senior Reagan aides are expected to consider a broad range of classified recommendations prepared by a group of middle-level officials. No date has been set for a meeting on the issue; one set for this week was delayed because of scheduling problems, the officials said.

"It's been the kind of thing more appropriately left to the intelligence agencies," one Reagan aide said. "They are responsible for protecting sources and methods and have a right to express concern whenever it seems like they might be compromised."

But another official said that, while

the dispute had not reached the point "where there has to be the President's involvement" the situation will undoubtedly change if a decision is reached on the recommendations.

Mr. Reagan avoided comment on the dispute at two recent ceremonies involving intelligence agents. Wednesday night he appeared before the Veterans of the Office of Strategic Services, an organization that includes Mr. Casey. Today he awarded the Distinguished Service Medal posthumously to Joseph J. Rochefort, a who is credited with breaking Japanese codes during World War II as a Navy intelligence officer.

The Administration officials say their hope is to frame the debate on the

media's role in reporting secrets in the context of the need for United States intelligence operations and the need for secrecy to keep such operations functioning.

Mr. Casey had taken the lead in efforts to persuade The Washington Post not to publish information related to the Pelton case and had also requested that the Justice Department determine if NBC Television should be prosecuted for broadcast material related to the case.

Administration officials said that, while Mr. Casey has not been "free-lancing" in his actions, it is unclear whether he was operating with the permission of the White House or simply informing it of what he was doing.